Mask On

I

First Mimi says she will wear a mask on the airplane
back in February 2020
and I wince, Mimi, is that really necessary
Foolish me
By April we are warned to mask it or casket
Women sent to sewing
some men, too, but I don't know any
I dig and find one leftover vacuum bag to
cut for filters
Proud of my ingenuity
Pipe cleaners make a comeback as nose pinchers
I tear and save closing strips from coffee bags
Elastic availability stretches so thin it grows precious like Ball jar lids in canning season
Lucky me to have a sister who measures my head
custom makes me a mask to match my coat
another to match my eyes
a third with adjustable ear straps
The home effort
My masks dry over the towel bar like nylon hose
Nose-warmers on best days
idle conversation-stoppers
smile blockers
We crinkle our eyes
wave our hands
We grow devout
Stash extras in glove box
Don't leave home without one
Shame the deniers

II

Meeting Barbara for a fall walk along coastal trail

we emerge from our cars

masks dangling from our wrists

daring to smile open-faced at each other in public
We approach and play Who Will Mask First
a dominance game we both win
go first and show your commitment
go last and show your reckless faith
We amble forward on the path
swaying in tandem on the horizontal axis
lean in *remember* careen out
Ocean breeze gusto vivifies the free skin
Stale breath bellows in a cotton cave
nose tip evolves a prophylactic flap
eons to come
to be ceremoniously circumcised to mark my status
but as what
I turn my back to Barbara
hold out an arm
stay away while I lower my mask and suck in moist green
for an instant welcome why we are here
walking along the coast after a rain

III

Eleven months in
mask doubling
two-faced or not
The variants are about
the British
the South African
the Brazilian

Hushed warnings from authorities

do the double up

do the tighten up

My paper goes on under my cloth

the bottom edge peeks out, white

I enter the grocery with my underwear showing

ignore raised eyebrows

Mask doubling feels secure

like wearing a fresh tampon and a pad on heavy days

I see you other people but you can’t get me

Recognize Lois eyeing cereal? No you don’t

To mask is to cover up

To double is deceiving

To double mask, a mirror trick

Send that virus reeling

IV

And I bring home a positive test result
A woman of the people
Let’s taste that virus before the vaccines vacuum up the crumbs
County Public Health finds me at home
I’ve been found out
They call daily
Their name is Danielle
The powers of suggestion grab my throat
is it sore
My tummy
did I just want to vomit
My muscles
is that why my back is stiff
My nose
dribbling
My mind
malaise
My body

bleary
Bleary, a word not on Danielle’s list of descriptors
“Do I mean foggy?”
No Heavens no
I regret the test
No news is good news
I’m positive it’s false
Must retest
Why?
Because I feel fine
Because I am days away from my second shot
Because I am careful
Because quarantining in our little shack is a bummer
My husband is negative
his test results
his attitude
I hear a story on the television news
A woman died only one day after her positive test results
Do not dismiss
Don the masks
Open the windows
Slide the doors
Wash the hands
Wipe the surfaces
Sleep separately
Glide away from each other
Practice avoidance as if angry
but rub back to back once a day
hippos in a muddy pond
And mask
The mask has come home
where yesterday we could unmask breath openly kiss
Cat gets all my caresses
Corona kitty
purr

V

The unveiling begins in 2021

Encouraged to drop from double jabs

Masks mostly stay pocketed

chin hair gets plucked

Families hug like airport reunions

New babes rock in the rejoice of relieved grandparents

My yoga buds meet for dinner outdoors

smiles stretch in the golden glow of the day’s last rays

My mahjong group resumes

clicking and clacking memory lapses back in place

Six hundred people die daily from Covid in the United States

I read in early May

what to say

I back away

My masks cling to me now in crowded indoor public places like shy children

They smell rank

I wash them

They still have an odor

like old people to young noses

VI

Come midsummer countries of contagion no longer loan their names to variants

Now we credit the Greek alphabet

trick out the Delta with a fresh coat of N95s bought in bulk

I feel the blues

Haiti, Afghanistan, surges, drought, fire, flood

By 2022 we may all pledge to Delta Lambda I Don’t Give an Iota

VII

Our borders are not masked

We know where they are

floating

free

Our borders are floating freely

from my breath to yours

and yours to theirs

and theirs to ours

Globular

So we net borders

knit mesh

filter the air

sift the breath

We mask

re-mask

renew our masks

maybe with damask

and ask

ask when

when will it end

don’t ask

the answer is masked